

To: Joshua Lederberg
From: John Steinbruner
Date: June 15, 1992
Re: Regenerating the BW Discussions

According to my records the last communication with our Soviet and presumably now Russian counterparts occurred nearly a year ago. On June 27, 1991 I received a fax letter from Vorob'ev (his transliteration) saying the he and Rayevsky had reviewed the paper Tom Monath and I had sent them and that they had some ideas of their own they wanted to send to us. He said that they expected to have a draft paper of their own in September and hoped to come here sometime thereafter to discuss both papers. The coup attempt then intervened and I have not heard from him since.

It will undoubtedly require a substantial initiative on our part to regenerate our discussions. Judging from experience with other relevant exchanges, we can expect to find our Russian colleagues intensely interested and liberated from some of the restraints they previously perceived but also very distracted and unable to finance their normal share of the working group's activities. As a practical matter we will probably have to assume primary responsibility for organizing and financing any meetings and related activities. In compensation for assuming a greater burden, however, we can also have higher aspirations. The political situation and the succeeding governments may not be entirely transformed, but there now is much greater chance for the openness and candid cooperation that has all along been our principal objective. The opportunity may be perishable if it is not developed at what is unquestionably a formative moment. There is some urgency.

I believe we should redesign the agenda of the meetings and the proposals we make to reflect the new situation. That in turn will require some discussion among ourselves. With that first step in mind, let me try to summarize the major substantive and procedural issues:

1. Who do we meet with?

As best I can guess, all of the counterpart group will now belong to the Russian Federation. I believe we must and should start with them, but I also assume that we will need to consider supplementary discussion with representatives from at least some of the other successor states. We will have to make a judgment as to whether to integrate these discussions or try to have them separately.

2. Do we have a consensus message to convey?

In our previous discussions we have concentrated on the categorization of agents in terms of risk and the definition of plausible thresholds for determining the amounts of these agents that would be inconsistent with the BWC. I do not think we should repudiate or ignore that line of argument but I do think we should now give greater priority to the underlying purpose of inducing a pattern of transparency and systematic international monitoring of BW related activities. I believe that organized transparency and active monitoring focussed on apparent violations will have to be the primary means of controlling weapons proliferation generally. I also believe that proliferation controls will rapidly become the central concern of security policy. If so, then BW arrangements might come to have a major formative role in redirecting overall security policy. This is plausible enough to imagine strong interest at high political levels and some dramatic developments in institutional cooperation.

3. Should we attempt to formulate an agreed proposal?

In the past we resisted such an objective as being neither feasible nor appropriate. I believe we should now reconsider. If we can reach consensus among ourselves, I would argue that we should attempt to enlist Russian/CIS colleagues as well and should attempt to issue a common paper.

4. Should we revisit the Sverdlovsk incident?

A series of articles in the Russian press dating back to December have suggested that an accident at the BW facility did initiate the anthrax outbreak in 1979 and that various military and state security officials consciously perpetrated a deception to conceal the installation's culpability. The published material derives from recent interviews with officials who said they were involved. It does not provide a detailed account of what happened but some of the assertions are difficult to reconcile with the account that we were given. In particular the articles cite statements by individuals who said they performed autopsies on victims and saw evidence of pulmonary origins of the infection.

There is a tendency in the United States to assume that the most nefarious explanation of this event is the correct one, and therefore these sketchy and not yet authoritative accounts will probably be believed. Certainly the explanation we were given will not be believed unless the new allegations are refuted or somehow made consistent with what we were told.

There are several possible constructions of this situation with very different implications for our activities: a)

The Burgasov/Nikiforov account is both accurate and substantially complete. Contrary accounts of an accident at the research facility either involve a separate incident at a different time or simply reflect unfounded fears of responsibility arising at the facility and generating a great deal of protective activity that was externally observed as cleanup and coverup. b) Burgasov and Nikiforov did give us an accurate account of their experience, which was nonetheless only a part of the actual episode. That would require that the case sequence they were directly involved with did extend over two months and did exclusively involve intestinal infections. The story as to the origins of the infection in contaminated meat might have been given to them by local officials and might have seemed plausible to them or at least not something they could question as a practical matter. If there were pulmonary cases they would have been handled by other people at another facility. c) Burgasov and Nikiforov gave us an account which they knew to be inaccurate and misleading. That would entail at least the suppression of some relevant evidence and at the extreme the fabrication of nearly everything they said.

I am of course reluctant to believe that the actual situation falls in category c, but if it does then we have to ask whether we can usefully proceed with our original counterparts. They and we would be seriously compromised by deliberate deception, and arguably both committees might have to be replaced in order to transcend the episode. Clearly we need to make some judgment about this within our own group even if we chose not to initiate any additional direct discussion with our Russian colleagues.

I suggest that we organize a meeting of our own group to review these issues and to work out a new agenda we might use in suggesting another round of the exchange. If you wish I could circulate the draft concept paper I sent to you earlier as a outline of the general security issues that might provide the context for BW issues. That paper has been exposed to Russian officials who have been interested in it.